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Viral Encounters: Xenophobia, Solidarity, and Place-based Lessons from Chinese Migrants in Italy

Elizabeth L. Krause and Massimo Bressan

Migrant and refugee populations have been identified as among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 due to what medical anthropologists have described as structural vulnerability. We argue significant differences exist between migrant groups and offer lessons for society at large. We develop the concept of *viral encounters* to frame an analysis of social narratives, representations, and practices involved in coping with threats of transmission and practices of prevention. Specifically, the globalized city of Prato offers a case study due to its unique relationship with COVID-19. Instead of a COVID-19 epicenter, however, Prato emerged as a contagion exception particularly as related to its Chinese migrant community. We use a place-based framework to argue that the threat of xenophobia, preparedness with quarantine, and the will of solidarity motivated an entire migrant community to take action—well before the nationwide lockdown began and extending beyond its conclusion. We combine virtual ethnography with health data as well as evidence of xenophobia and solidarity to offer an analysis. We argue that the effects of solidarity reconfigure dominant ideologies of individualism, open space for collective orientation toward a human economy, and offer potential to alleviate detrimental impacts of pandemics.

Key words: COVID-19, Chinese migrants, Italy, xenophobia, solidarity

Introduction

Migrant and refugee populations have been identified as among the most vulnerable to COVID-19. The World Health Organization has noted that their vulnerability stems from socioeconomic disparities that may include overcrowded housing conditions, barriers to care, and risk of discrimination (WHO 2020). In fine-grained ethnographic studies, medical anthropologists have documented and analyzed how structural vulnerability among migrants creates the conditions for economic exploitation along with embodied suffering. Scholars have argued that migrants' social positionality articulates with race, class, gender, as well as (un)documented status to exacerbate ill health (Altin and Sanò 2017; Cartwright 2011; Holmes 2013; Quaranta 2006; Queseda, Hart and Bourgois 2011; Ravenda 2019). We take seriously these unequal conditions while also arguing significant differences exist between migrant groups that offer lessons for society at large relevant to a pandemic.

Italy became the first country in the West to manage a surge of novel coronavirus cases. We recall images of hospitals

and morgues being overwhelmed. A national lockdown ensued with residents facing check-points monitoring self-certification forms to restrict movement. People dealt with fear and isolation through song, poetry, videos, and humor. As of September 23, Italy had registered 300,897 positive cases of COVID-19, with total deaths reaching 35,738. Although this is equivalent to a national case fatality rate of 11.9%, the second highest on record as of this writing,¹ Italy's response as of the fall was applauded for reaching low infection and fatality rates (Braw 2020).

In this article, we develop the concept of viral encounters to frame an analysis of social narratives and representations involved in coping with threats of transmission and practices of prevention. Specifically, we draw on the globalized city of Prato to offer a case study due to its unique relationship with COVID-19. Prato hosts Europe's largest concentration of Chinese migrants, whose formidable entrepreneurs and workers in the globalized iteration of the prestigious Made in Italy fashion industry have suffered from xenophobic representations as "deviant" (Bracci 2012:97), "ruthlessly exploitive" (Dei Ottati and Cologna 2015:31), and as "uneducated money-grubbers" (Krause 2018:73). Such racist stigmas contrast with the views Chinese migrants have of themselves as hardworking and self-sacrificing, expressed variably as being "high-minded" or having "spiritual insistence" (Krause 2018:77, 110). Both of these sentiments, which have animated the fast fashion world of Prato, are deeply rooted in the history of Wenzhou and reference a staunch determination to become entrepreneurs due to the autonomy promised in becoming a boss.

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Politicians, public health officials, and journalists feared that Prato would be the most dangerous place in Italy after the outbreak of the novel coronavirus due to its concentration of Chinese migrants. Instead of a COVID-19 epicenter, however, Prato emerged as a contagion exception. Chinese migrants in Prato have not had novel coronavirus, and the health agency that traces healthcare in the region (ARS Toscana 2020) at the pandemic's height only documented a single case in all of the greater metropolitan area of central Tuscany.

Chinese migrants embraced early and stringent quarantine strategies that successfully protected them and the community at large against contracting and spreading the virus. They also urged politicians to slow-down opening the economy when the pressure was at its height to do so. We argue that the threat of xenophobia, preparedness with quarantine, and the will of solidarity motivated an entire migrant community to take action—well before the nationwide lockdown began and extending beyond its conclusion.

We combine virtual ethnography with health data as well as evidence of xenophobia and solidarity to offer an analysis. To that end, we consider a form of *viral encounters* to be coordinated efforts between public institutions and voluntary organizations. We trace how solidarity efforts—including gifts of masks, protective gear, and respiratory machines from the Chinese community—emerged spontaneously. We suggest that solidarity practices not only conditioned political and administrative actions but also improved them. We document a widespread shift in dominant attitudes toward Chinese migrants from one of xenophobia to one of respect to argue that policymakers need to acknowledge migrant contributions as well as agency. We argue that the effects reconfigure dominant ideologies of individualism, open space for collective orientation toward a human economy, and offer potential to alleviate detrimental impacts of pandemics.

Place-Based Knowledge during a Global Pandemic

Despite being diasporic migrants, Italy's Chinese residents have developed particular place-based knowledge. Migrant knowledge is place-based to the extent that it is deeply connected with the know-how, practices, and transactions in the local society. Ties are locally rooted in quotidian life and forged in the local productive system. Furthermore, connections to place get made through various brokers of social and economic relations, such as those working in the housing market or public administration, and through "weak ties" that connect people through schools, neighborhoods, associations, etc. The place-based knowledge of Chinese migrants developed in Prato through interactions with local Italians, many of them transplants from rural Tuscany and Southern Italy in decades past. All told, the place-based knowledge of migrants has become woven into the territory's social fabric (Krause and Li 2020). We believe that this blend of local-and-global awareness—based in networks, aspirations, as well as

fears—informed how this transnational migrant population dealt with the threat of COVID-19.

Economists, anthropologists, historians, geographers, and policymakers have broadly acknowledged how Chinese entrepreneurs developed a niche economy based on fast fashion in the historic factory-city of Prato (Baldassar et al. 2015; Lan 2015). The majority of Chinese residents in Prato migrated from Zhejiang Province in Southeast China, famous for its Wenzhou model of economic development. This economic model "fit like a glove" in relation to the Made in Italy model based on clusters and small family firms (Tomba 1999).

Some 25,000 migrants with Chinese citizenship reside officially in Prato, and estimates suggest about twice that number live in the city and its surroundings when undocumented migrants are included. At the close of 2019, the city registered a population of 195,089, of which 42,371, or 22 percent, were classified as *stranieri*, or foreign residents. (The national average is around 8.5% foreign residents.) Registered Chinese migrants total about 58 percent of official resident foreigners (Comune di Prato 2020).

The Chinese migrants are diverse in terms of socioeconomic class, education, occupation, as well as documented status. Tight-knit families make up Prato's 6,000 Chinese-owned firms. More than half of those firms (3,700) are categorized as *confezioni*, or cut-and-sew workshops. Other Chinese firms include fast-fashion wholesalers, textile factories, and services that support those businesses and the people working in them, such as real estate activities, restaurants, bars, and small retail shops. As of 2019, one in three businesses in Prato was foreign owned (Camera di Commercio 2020).

We draw on the concept of place-based knowledge to connect with approaches to local economic development and pandemic responses given the ways in which Chinese migrants were positioned in relation to the local Made in Italy economy and the novel coronavirus. Anthropologists have theorized the importance of place as fundamental to the human condition. Margaret Rodman (1992) pushed the discipline to consider place not as merely a taken-for-granted physical setting but as a construct intricately linked to history, politics, and power relations. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) contributed to critical debates about the meaning of place as questions of deterritorialization became prominent in light of transnational migrations, postcolonial dynamics, and globalizing supply chains. Keith Basso (1996) drew on his Western Apache interlocutors to inspire the notion that "wisdom sits in places." In more recent decades, Cristina Grasseni (2009) focused on dairy breeding and cheese making in the Italian Alps to argue that locality is enacted through personal skill and tacit knowledge. With a sense of urgency that coalesces around so many world problems, Setha Low (2016) illuminated the intersections between mobility and place-based identities that arise as people leave their homes and search for meaning in new places. Finally, Frédéric Keck (2020) has drawn attention to the ways in which geopolitical relationships are localized and shape people's imaginings and preparedness with regard to pandemics.

In an influential book-length essay, *La Coscienza dei Luoghi* (*The Consciousness of Places*), the Italian economist Giacomo Becattini (2015) takes as his object of inquiry the problem facing Italy's economy and its uneven development. Becattini draws on his legacy of shaping debates in Italy and Europe related to regional development, especially connected to industrial districts (see Becattini, Bellandi, and De Propriis 2009) and economist Sebastiano Brusco's umbrella concept of "local production systems" with distinguishing features: active firms, the territory on which these firms come into being, and the people who live in the territory with their values, histories, and formative relationships (Pyke, Becattini, and Sengenberger 1990). In his final essay, Becattini's vision for ferrying the country beyond crisis relies on place-based knowledge grounded in the idea of "territory as a choral subject." The metaphor suggests a togetherness of voices that finds harmony in a particular context. In his vision, context becomes anchored in place and tied to "authentic motors of development"—historical patrimony, infrastructure, and collective know-how (Becattini 2015:22-23). In this way, local economic development becomes in sync with diverse human economies and local social relations (Gibson-Graham 2014; Granovetter 1985; Mauss 2000; Polanyi 1977).

Place-based approaches have gained purchase in the realm of policy applications to local and regional development and problems of territorial inequalities and rising authoritarian dynamics across Europe. Fabrizio Barca (2018:1) criticizes "space-blind one-size-fits-all institutional reforms" that have dominated Eurocracy for the past thirty years and instead points to a "need for a place-based approach." His vision of place-based policies aims to build on "embedded local knowledge" with a sense of community as social capital and to strive for inclusivity (Barca, McCann, and Rodríguez-Pose 2012:147).

These place-based approaches resonate with the "cultural turn" in economic anthropology, which opened space for a "local models" perspective and brought attention to a "moral economy" thesis (Hann and Hart 2011:84). Prato's particular economic landscape is characterized by small firms whose owners, whether Italian or foreign, place a high premium on autonomy despite entanglements with informal economies, gift principles, and self-exploitative practices. A number of labor rights organizations have documented widespread subcontracting arrangements between Italian and Chinese firms, who assure competitiveness through flexibility for luxury brands. The authors of the *Tailored Wages* report on big brands concluded, "We would not consider Italy to be a 'low risk' country in terms of rights"—especially with regards to fast fashion cut-and-sew workshops (Clean Clothes Campaign 2014:52). For Prato, such conditions have a long history. During our ethnographic work, former Italian sweater-makers recounted how in the 1980s-2000s, as *terzisti*, or subcontractors, they worked long hours, that is, sixteen to twenty per day, recalling that they shared a structural similarity with their Chinese counterparts, using the metaphor "*i cinesi siamo noi*—we are the Chinese."

Methods

During non-pandemic times, we have demonstrated our commitment to conducting immersive, long-term, face-to-face ethnographic research based on sustained participant observation, interviews, and improvisation. We collaborated and completed a major transnational project between 2012-2016, in which we analyzed how Chinese and Italian individuals, families, and institutions cope with globalization. The project included hospital-based and urban ethnography as well as engaged community outreach to combat structural racism and segregation.

The dangerous conditions of COVID-19 barred us from carrying out our current research in person. In the United States, on February 29, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a Level 3: Reconsider Travel advisory for Italy, and on March 31, it issued a Level 4: Global Health Advisory, Do Not Travel.² Before long, United States universities followed suit and barred researchers from international travel and in-person research. Nevertheless, as we researched and wrote this article, we aimed to sustain our sensibilities of knowledge produced through embodied, lived, social relations. Although we shifted from field-based to physically distanced research, we extended the arts of noticing (Tsing 2015) in terms of tuning in to happenings with all of our senses and sensibilities—critical, affective, and anti-racist.

The methods of ethnographic noticing under pandemic conditions involve staying attuned to the principles of immersive research. We continued to enact the arts of noticing in writing, to thickly describe, to archive our experiences, to find important stories, and to build as well as sustain relationships. Given our topic, essential to us was a core lesson from the anti-fascist Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971): to critically investigate claims of common sense. Indeed, common sense is rarely good sense (Crehan 2016). The Jamaican-British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1996:439) long ago posited the idea of "contradictory common sense" referring to mindsets that take root and lend shape to popular culture, everyday life, and dominant narratives. Hall's insights help understand how political wars of position are fought and won. Common sense notions are integral to establishing and sustaining hegemony. Our analysis interrogates claims based on common sense to expose the difference between the COVID-19 disease origin story and its life history with regards to Chinese migrants across the globe but especially in Italy.

Our research unfolded through collaboration via Zoom meetings. Krause, under stay-at-home orders in Amherst, Massachusetts, beginning March 14, 2020, and Bressan, in lockdown a week earlier on March 9 in Prato, Italy, tuned into the ways in which Italian society was responding. We set out to follow and document the COVID happenings at various levels: social networks, representations via popular culture and social media, political forums via Facebook, news coverage, and health data. As Krause instructed her students to take their ethnographic projects online, she and Bressan engaged

in a similar shift. We found guidance in numerous resources (Lupton 2020) and were enlivened by various initiatives, such as talks sponsored by the Società Italiana di Antropologia Applicata (SIAA), of which Bressan is a founding member, and events organized by the Ethnography Collective @ UMass Amherst, of which Krause is a founding organizer. Such groups offered fellowship and support to ethnographers who felt particularly lost and at a loss during the pandemic due to their commitment to in-the-flesh fieldwork.

In this article, we push forward our *encounter ethnography* approach, initially conceptualized and carried out in a field-present collaborative framework as we focused on experiences of globalization. In that project, we nurtured encounter ethnography as a theoretically informed methodological framework to emphasize experiences or dynamics that are at odds with one another. We have argued elsewhere that our approach to encounter ethnography equalizes the ethnographic field through placing migrants and non-migrants in the same conceptual framework (Krause and Bressan 2018), and we found inspiration in a so-called locality analysis attentive to global power practices and perspectives (Glick Schiller 2012).

For this article, we paid keen attention to happenings that spoke to *viral encounters*. Thus, the data that we analyze fall into three primary types: (1) interviews conducted pre-COVID with Chinese migrant research participants focused on the theme of discrimination; (2) culturally produced materials created during the pandemic that circulated on social media such as audio jokes, video performances, or images that represent encounters between Chinese migrants and Italian citizens; and (3) expert encounters, either initiated by elected officials, conducted remotely, and broadcast publicly between the representatives and residents, or information from public health data generated from our direct inquiries with colleagues.

Viral Encounters

We develop and deploy the notion of *viral encounters* to focus attention on the generative effects from clashes that arise in the course of a global pandemic. In our tracing and tracking of encounters related to the virus and, specifically, to Chinese migrants in Italy, we began to notice a pattern in the production of social meanings. Initially, the forms of cultural production played on taken-for-granted assumptions about Chinese migrants. Cultural products took on the air of blame and contagion. The common sense narrative went something like this: the virus started in China, many Chinese migrants travel back and forth between China and northern Italy, and therefore the spread of the virus to Europe must have come from Chinese people. Xenophobia spread like a mutated virus. Before long, however, xenophobia withered in the face of solidarity that took the form of proactive and rigid self-imposed quarantine practices.

In our pre-COVID research, we asked our Chinese participants about discrimination and coded a total of 117 segments in the interviews using MAXQDA. Two-thirds

had lived in other cities in Europe or Italy before settling in Prato, suggesting a high degree of mobility and providing a comparative perspective. Quite a few commented that racism was worse in Prato than other places they had lived. For this article, we tallied twenty-seven of the forty-one transcribed interviews, or 66 percent, contained references to specific instances of discrimination. Experiences ranged across a spectrum: no experiences due to lack of direct contact with Italians; covert experiences attributed to language barriers in institutional settings; and overt experiences of feeling despised or treated violently. Some participants acknowledged dehumanizing everyday forms of racism occurring in public spaces: being stared at, scolded, or spit upon, having stones thrown at them, being name-called, or being accused of stealing work from Italians. Some told of having been mugged on the streets or robbed in their homes. A few said they did not experience discrimination and reported positive experiences in healthcare settings. Excerpts below capture the range.

One participant explained why Chinese migrants were the targets of discrimination. “It’s because there are many Chinese people in Prato, and then most of them do not pay attention to hygiene. They spit everywhere, and the Italians hate that” (Interview N. 14). Another participant underscored the separation between migrants and Italians. Asked whether Italians despised her, she said, “We didn’t communicate with foreigners, so we didn’t experience this feeling” (Interview N. 17). This contrasts with participants who felt bullied or targeted. One interviewee reported once being hit by the police when he was pulled over without proper residence papers and shared stories from those who experienced hostility from neighbors:

Sometimes, a group of my friends, when we are free, we talk and drink together. We talk about that sometimes. They say when foreigners [Italians] see Chinese people, the foreigners say Chinese people are annoying and they make noise. I used to work in the factory. The landlady said sometimes if we work a bit late at night, the foreigners [Italians] would take stones to hit the windows.... They said it’s too late for the factory to operate at night. (Interview N. 18)

A migrant who had lived in Montecatini reported that Chinese people were stereotyped as having “Kung Fu” powers. “Around 2001 and 2002, there was an amnesty policy. At that time, they came [to the factory] once, I was scared and it left a shadow in my life. After that, I became scared of the police.... They didn’t even let us move our hands. They thought if we moved, we would act like Jet Li or Bruce Lee” (Interview N. 20).

Others expressed a general sense that they could not count on the Italian government to assist them. Infamous incidents involved former mayor Roberto Cenni, who ran his successful campaign on an anti-immigrant platform. During his term (2009–2014), the mayor attempted to create a modern “ghetto” in the zone of Macrolotto Zero with an ordinance that restricted hours of operation of businesses and thus the movement of inhabitants—regulations that pertained almost

exclusively to Chinese migrants who resided in that neighborhood; the region's administrative court in March 2012 deemed the policy to be discriminatory and thus unjustifiable. An infamous head of security was particularly hostile to Chinese migrants and targeted them with helicopter-style raids (Bressan and Krause 2014).

From Dark Humor to Rampant Xenophobia

As COVID-19 spread across the Italian peninsula, a series of jokes began to circulate. We received a number of these jokes from Italian friends and colleagues. The first arrived February 8, 2020, in the form of an audio clip. It features a salesman of sorts who speaks with a Neapolitan accent. With the tone of a hawker, he claims to offer a service: to rent Chinese people with a cough so others could avoid long lines, or in his words, "*Gennaro a Forcella affitta 'o cinese con la tosse.*"³ The bad-humor service involved several price points with the following scenarios: if you don't want to wait in line at public offices, €15 (\$18); if you want space to ride the subway, €50 (\$60); and if you enter a crowded restaurant and want a table without waiting, €70 (\$83). The idea was that the coughing Chinese person would scare away other patrons. The irony played on two stereotypes: Neapolitans are reputed for *l'arte di arrangiarsi*, or the art of getting by, in other words, being able to make a living from limited opportunities, whereas Chinese migrants were assumed to be the carriers and spreaders of the virus. The joke is only funny in a social world in which people view Chinese as always already exploitable. Typically, people rent property—apartments, cars, machines—not other human beings.

That Chinese migrants were an easy target of sentiments of resentment was not difficult to find. Krause received the link to the performance of an Italian comedian who performed a remake of Neapolitan musician Renato Carosone's parody "Tu vuoi fa' l'americano." The original version calls out an Italian migrant who wants to make it big in America. In the 2020 remake, "Dado Cinese virale," the Italian comedian Dado performs a video version in which he plays a Chinese migrant who works in the Italian fashion industry. The offensive rendition of the Chinese guy, standing in front of an American flag, wearing a silly lantern hat and a leopard print shirt, and playing a guitar as he sings with an exaggerated Chinese accent, is counterbalanced by its clever ridicule of high fashion and the globalized industry and the fact that even luxury brands often bear Made in China labels or are made in Italy with Chinese labor.⁴

People of Chinese origin were quick to pick up on negative stereotypes. Globalized xenophobia appeared as contagious as the global pandemic itself. Fear grew that they would be targets of xenophobia. Well before Italy's nationwide quarantine, Chinese migrants were being blamed for the virus. Various media outlets referred to COVID as "*virus cinese*," or the Chinese virus. In early March, *The Guardian* (2020) reported attacks on Chinese migrants living in Italy and produced a 6:37-minute video, "Coronavirus in Italy:

lockdown, solidarity and racism." The report follows Chinese restaurant owner Zhou "Sonia" Fenxia who ran a popular Chinese restaurant in Rome until she had to shut it down when patrons stopped coming. "We are Chinese. We are not a virus," she asserts. The video shows racist graffiti painted on the back of a train seat, "*CINESI INFETTI TORNATE A CASA!*" translated as, "You Chinese are infected, go back home!" and embeds video footage from a surveillance camera of Chinese youth being attacked in a bar. As Fenxia says, "We must all resist these moments of racism."

Health and Demographic Data

When reflecting on the demographics of COVID-19 in Italy, common sense proved wrong. We cannot imagine a better example than this: Chinese migrants were assumed to be the carriers and spreaders of a virus in Italy but in fact ended up taking extreme quarantine measures to ensure they neither contracted nor spread COVID-19. For many people, this fact was and is hard to believe. We turn to health and demographic data to drive home the point.

The existence of place-based issues related to health and safety in Prato has manifested a formidable presence on the radars of Italian inspection regimes since Chinese migrants began opening cut-and-sew workshops in Prato's industrial district with particular momentum in the early 2000s. After the tragic Teresa Moda garment factory fire that killed seven Chinese workers in December 2013 (Krause and Bressan 2014), a veritable apparatus of control emerged in the heart of the metropolitan area of Central Tuscany. The Region of Tuscany's campaign of "Lavoro Sicuro," or Safe Work, extended its reach to the sprawling Florence-Empoli-Prato-Pistoia urbanized area. The revisioned security apparatus focused almost exclusively on Chinese-owned or managed firms. In the most recent phase of the Safe Work campaign, 7,404 Chinese firms vs. seven Italian firms were inspected (personal communication, Director, Disease Prevention, Central Tuscany Department of Health, April 3, 2018). Acutely aware of the intensification of inspections, tensions began to rise within the Chinese community. On June 29, 2016, in Osmannoro near the Ikea north of Florence, an inspection encounter involving a man and his ten-month-old grandson turned physical. In less than an hour, hundreds of Chinese protesters arrived. Riot police followed. Eventually, Italian officials would question the legitimacy of the resistance and attribute the spontaneous mobilization to the Chinese mafia, thus perpetuating a stereotype that migrants do not value civic life (Bressan and Krause 2017).

Moving to the coronavirus health threat, two demographic facts put the region of Tuscany at particularly high risk: its concentration of Chinese migrants and its elderly population. Migrants and elderly individuals have been considered to be at higher risk of coronavirus. In 2019, Italy ranked as the EU member state with the highest share of people over sixty-five years old (22.8%) with forty-four as the national median age. The oldest region in Italy is Liguria (28.5%) with a median

Table 1. COVID-19 Cases among the Resident Population, Region of Tuscany (July 30, 2020)

Province	Population	Infected	Infection Rate of Total Population
Florence	1,011,349	3,281	0.32%
Lucca	387,876	1,384	0.36%
Massa	194,878	1,056	0.54%
Pisa	419,037	948	0.23%
Pistoia	292,473	756	0.26%
Arezzo	342,654	693	0.20%
Prato	257,716	558	0.22%
Livorno	334,832	484	0.14%
Siena	267,197	430	0.16%
Grosseto	221,629	408	0.18%
Non-residents	N/A	471	N/A
Tuscany	3,729,641	10,469	0.28%

Note: Table prepared by authors, adapted from Tuscany's ARS data, "I contagiati sulla popolazione residente." Non-residents listed were cared for at hospitals in the region's jurisdiction. URL:<https://www.ars.toscana.it/banche-dati/dati-sintesi-sintocovid-aggiornamenti-e-novita-sul-numero-dei-casi-deceduti-tamponi-per-provincia-e-per-asl-della-regione-toscana-e-confronto-con-italia-con-quant-sono-i-decessi-per-comune?provenienza=home_ricerca&dettaglio=ric_geo_covid&par_top_geografia=090>

age of forty-eight as compared to Tuscany, the second oldest region (24.4%), with forty-five as its median age. Both fall in the category of Europe's oldest regions.⁵ Italy's migrant population is fairly young and thus may be less impacted by the virus. Considering the disease's origins and the concentration of Chinese residents, it is worth noting that Prato ended up being the last province in Italy to register persons affected with COVID-19 and seventh overall (Table 1).

We draw on a mid-pandemic report to offer a snapshot of the epidemic from the period in which the virus reached its peak. Data of cases by ethnicity or national origin were slow to emerge in public reports; at our prompting, Fabio Voller, Coordinator of the Epidemiology Observatory with Tuscany's Regional Health Agency, conducted an analysis that identified the national origin of 6,000 cases, of which 100 were "foreigners," primarily Albanian, and only one in the entire region was of Chinese nationality (personal communication). At that time, he noted that the Province of Prato had a relatively low level of overall infection (404 cases, or sixteen per 10,000, in a population of 257,716 as of April 15). No cases of persons of Chinese origin were registered in Prato. We published an op-ed citing these data (April 21), and a health agency article cited our piece (Silvestri, Innocenti, and Stasi 2020; see Krause and Bressan 2020). Eventually, media outlets reported the trend, as with the headline, "From Zero to Hero: Italy's Chinese Help Beat Coronavirus" (Ognibene 2020).

The Spread of Solidarity and Spiritual Insistence 2.0

Evidence of Chinese migrant solidarity manifested in schools, supermarkets, streets, and social media well before the national lockdown. Italian residents in Prato recall

being concerned when they noticed supermarket shelves emptying out before stay-at-home orders were in place. School administrators and teachers became concerned that Chinese children were not attending school to avoid being the targets of racism, and they unsuccessfully strategized ways to get students to return to classes. Streets and bars in neighborhoods such as Macrolotto Zero typically full of Chinese migrants suddenly were empty. Workshops and fast-fashion warehouses fell silent.

The circulation and threat of the novel coronavirus led the Chinese community to prioritize solidarity, health, and well-being over economic advancement. Our analysis suggests that the threat of stigma, knowledge of quarantine, and the will of solidarity motivated an entire migrant community to take action and, similar to Chinese migrants elsewhere in Italy and Europe, engage in multiple and prolonged self-quarantines. The measures of self-isolation have been referred to as a double or even triple quarantine.

The first quarantine occurred as many Chinese migrants traveled home in January or early February to celebrate Chinese New Year and then experienced their first confinement in mainland China. Upon their return to Prato, users of the WeChat social media app circulated messages, tracking individual travel departures and arrivals between Italy and China, health status, and phone numbers. Practices flourished in which friends pressured others to follow self-quarantine measures back in Europe.

The second quarantine occurred back in Europe and involved another several weeks of self-isolation in February and early March. A number of observers reported on this phenomenon. Blogger Huang Miaomiao, who uses the hashtag *#iononsonounvirus* (I am not a virus), reflected on the phenomenon of a double quarantine. She traces the middle of

Figure 1. Chinese Spoof of an Italian Mayor's Video That Went Viral

January to the time in which coronavirus was already creating concern in Italy. She writes that members of the Chinese community, aware of the devastating effects of the virus, took it upon themselves to embrace protocol that created immunity (Miaomiao 2020). Miaomiao underscores safety measures: intensive attention to hygiene, use of masks and protective devices even inside homes, shifts to do shopping in such a way that only one person in an apartment building would go to the supermarket for multiple families in isolation; and near total social distancing and elimination of external relations.

The triple quarantine occurred in line with Italy's nationwide stay-at-home order on March 9. Stories of violent acts of xenophobia from cities to the North and South continued to circulate. Worry grew among members of the Chinese community that such violence could spread to Prato. They sensed being in a vulnerable position to become victims of a major blame campaign. Some feared for their lives. They wondered if they would be pressured to leave the country. Being seen as the source of contagion could devastate their social well-being and threaten their businesses and economic livelihood.

We reached out to several members of the Chinese community, and they uniformly confirmed extensive solidarity measures. Marco Wong, elected to Prato's city council in June 2019, identified underlying sentiments of solidarity that unfolded in three phases: fear of a formidable contagion stigma; solidarity against discrimination; and a desire to show goodwill through donations of medical masks and protective gear. He defined the first phase as deeply painful as people learned through social networks and

word of mouth of troubling incidents of xenophobia. There was profound concern among the Chinese migrants in Prato that they would become victims of hostility. In turn, a second phase gave rise to sentiments of solidarity and actions of good will, including some workshops converting operations to the manufacture of masks. He characterized the third phase as Chinese being recognized as saviors of the *patria*, or the nation, as manifested through widespread gifting of essential items such as masks and other medical equipment (Interview, April 3, 2020).

Evidence of solidarity also emerged via social media. One humorous example, which reinforces our concept of *viral encounters*, appeared in the form of a Chinese spoof of a video that went viral. The original video shows Italian mayor Gianfilippo Bancheri of Delia (Sicily) raging at his fellow citizens who continued to go out and socialize despite warnings. The mayor's video was posted on Facebook as viewers watched and shared it. An excerpt even played in the United States on John Oliver's show *Last Week Tonight*, recorded from his home, and registered 10 million views by March 29, 2020. A full-length 3:17-minute version was doctored up with Chinese characters, cute visuals and sounds, such as animated flames and fiery explosions, to add emphasis to the angry mayor's words (Figure 1). The creative rendering enjoyed its own viral circulation of 935,829 views on YouTube. In this version, the video makeover demonstrates Chinese citizens speaking back and poking fun at their fellow vulnerable humans.⁶

We consider the meta-commentary contained in this political video to be an excellent example of *viral encounters*: the video content is literally viral in that it focuses on the novel coronavirus and citizens ignoring public safety orders; the video itself is virtually viral as its popularity magnifies across platforms and contexts. Encounters occur on various scales, first between a mayor and his town's residents, then between the mayor and public viewers across the globe who, as subtitles suggest, speak English, and subsequently between the Italian mayor and Chinese viewers as subtitles indicate. The encounter indexes Chinese persons' global awareness; they were poignantly aware that they were targeted as the culprits and therefore, in a sense, this commentary offers a cultural encounter that is also a critique of rampant xenophobia and a show of solidarity with Chinese speakers the world over.

In an unanticipated move of health solidarity, it was leaders as well as workers from Prato's Chinese community who urged a slow approach to reopening the economy. To be clear, this cautionary posture took many by surprise because of the migrant reputation for being oriented to work hard and make money. We note the emergence of a recalibrated migrant outlook regarding the sense of possibilities. By mid-April, members of the Chinese community had calculated their economic losses and became vocal in their urging of caution with regards to the economy.

On Sunday, April 19, we tuned into *una diretta*, a public Facebook discussion between Prato's vice mayor, Luigi Biancalani, a medical doctor, along with Marco Wong and Teresa Lin, elected in June 2019 as the first two city councilors of Chinese origin to serve in Prato. The format was a thirty-five-minute Q&A discussion. The three public officials met in an online Zoom conference gallery (posted as a permanent link). Wong appears on the top left of the computer screen, Lin is on the top right, and Biancalani is on the bottom. Wong takes the lead with a Q&A format and reads in Italian questions submitted from members of the Chinese community. Lin provides translation from Italian to Chinese. We scribed fieldnotes from the public conversation. The take-away was profound economic displacement, especially in the textile and fashion sector, and ongoing concern about health and well-being. Entrepreneurs expressed that the fashion season was already a complete loss, so they were not eager to get back to work and risk their health. The only exception was to make masks. Speaking in Italian on behalf of a well-known Chinese entrepreneur, Wong brought this question from the floor to convey doubts about reopening production specifically and economic activities generally:⁷

Some Chinese entrepreneurs had a bit of doubt because perhaps opening now is still a little too early...first of all because there is a concern at the health level but also because let's say at this moment above all the clothing, in short, the collections that were supposed to be [produced] in this period are already gone. So he says but maybe-maybe we can focus on the health situation and to open when we will be truly safe. And then he also says let's

say a- a thanks to the work of the city of Prato because in short, and in his opinion, it worked very well especially in a correct way to invite the population to respect the lockdown. (Krause translation)

This commentary reflects profound place-based knowledge moored in a globalized version of the Made in Italy fashion sector. The tone reflects a careful prioritizing of safety over economic activity and thus serves to soften potential political conflict. The final sentence in which Wong recognizes the work of public officials demonstrates a gesture of solidarity. Although the Chinese community may have garnered a reputation as more obedient in following the lockdown rules, Wong sidesteps this issue, opting to unite the communities.

A number of firms were noted for converting production from fast fashion to health devices. Voluntary associations distributed thousands of masks and equipment to hospital and nursing homes. When the EU lagged in its support, donations arrived from China, reflecting a long history of mutual aid between Italy and China. Some observers reported that one of the first members of the COVID-19 help team were reportedly from Sichuan Province, where an Italian rescue team was the first from Western countries to provide resources and medical support in light of the Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008. Images circulated of boxes destined for Italy that included inspirational poems. One shipment, sent from Zhejiang Province migrant communities, included the message, "Sending Friends—floating clouds, people overseas; the moon, the bonding with home" (Figure 2). Another message referenced a 17th-century Italian missionary with "hope that the pandemic will be over, and the spring will finally come" (Figure 3).

Some have expressed cynicism about China's political motives, whereas others believe the gestures are sincere. The history of Italy-China relations is beyond the scope of this paper. In a migrant neighborhood of Prato, a banner stretched on a fence along a field (Figure 4) showing Chinese and Italian hands embraced echoing the hashtag *#andratuttobene* (everything will be ok). Individuals told of Chinese neighbors distributing masks for free from their cars. Mutual aid actions were reconfiguring relationships.

Conclusion

Structural vulnerability calls for intervention, but how do we intervene? What have we gained from developing the concept of *viral encounters* in tandem with an approach that seeks to understand a global pandemic from a perspective moored in place? The encounters reveal jarring moments, such as jokes that only "make sense" and circulate in a world in which certain stereotypes are as contagious and virulent as the wicked COVID-19 strain. The encounters also reveal sassy modes of contestation, in which a virtual community of overseas migrants speaks back and makes fun of stereotypes of defiant Italian counterparts whose mayors shame them for resisting lockdown measures. The pandemic produces more than dangerous germs: it generates contagious and unpredictable discourses. We argue that these are tightly linked

Figure 2. A Shipment Sent from Zhejiang Province Migrant Communities

to globalized economies yet ones built on relationships and know-how sutured to a Made In Italy context—with particular histories and reputations, steeped in sentiments of heritage and desires for authenticity that are part myth and part truth. We build on several strands of literature to suggest that intervention needs to embrace a firmly place-based orientation.

In asserting this position, we are not suggesting that all place-based approaches are by necessity good. Rather, in contexts of application, we believe that meaningful and effective interventions evolve from integrating participant insights that take seriously the complexities that come from bottom-up particulars rather than the willy-nilly application of hunches that derive from top-down generalities. When knowledge from various groups residing in a given place

Figure 3. A Message from Zhejiang Province Sent Hope for the End of the Pandemic

encounter one another, dialogues emerge and produce habits, practices, and behaviors that go beyond the expectations of common sense. We therefore wish to highlight the importance of a form of place-based knowledge that by necessity includes all components of a local society.

The Chinese migrants prioritized health and well-being over business and money. Their collective action of a triple quarantine as a means to prevent the spread of the virus represented a gift to the community at large. This builds on the local patrimony in terms of a plethora of diverse economic activities that underwrite capitalist value. One might trace examples back to a postwar peasant ethos, informal economic endeavors, and even militant egalitarianism, or to the immediate pre-COVID era that witnessed the circulation of children

Figure 4. A Banner Next to a Field in Prato Represented Chinese and Italian Solidarity

and construction of global households. Not spreading COVID stands as the ultimate gift of solidarity. Time will tell to what degree the withering away of xenophobia will endure as a form of reciprocity.

Finally, we argue that disease origin stories are distinct from their life histories. Such histories may be used for political purposes that are as dangerous as the disease itself. Alternatively, these histories may be as liberating as a pandemic's end. The paper's interweaving of a place-based framework with an encounter ethnography method allows us to illuminate the stories of solidarity and coordination that have developed within a community of migrants and between the broader social milieu.

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Notes

¹Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center. URL:<<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>; <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>

²URL:<<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/italy-travel-advisory.html>>

³URL:<<https://www.iltempo.it/home-tv/2020/01/31/video/o-cinese-con-la-tosse-napoli-audio-coronavirus-1274425/>>

⁴The original version was performed in 1956. URL:<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vYcQaWdhm4>>. The remake was published March 6, 2020. URL:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SgTZiJl_A0>

⁵Elderly populations across EU regions, 2020. URL:<<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20200402-1>>

⁶The original post of the Italian mayor on Facebook with claims of having gone viral. URL:<https://www.facebook.com/trtworld/videos/2603720733065803/?__so__=permalink&__rv__=related_videos> The Chinese meta-commentary version had 935,829 views by March 21, 2020. URL:<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YznOe67DXlc>> John Oliver included the angry Italian mayors on his show, March 31, 2020. URL:<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ellf2DBrWzU>>

⁷In diretta col vice sindaco Luigi Biancalani. URL:<<https://www.facebook.com/marcowongitaly/videos/885863105159548/?vh=e&d=n>>

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